

# Rhetorical Analysis of “The Drum Major Instinct”: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on Leadership

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Academics have long studied the rhetoric and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. because of his role in the Civil Rights Movement and the impact his words have had in defining American civil religion. His strong example of leadership in the face of injustice has been studied in many fields from many different perspectives. This rhetorical analysis looks at “The Drum Major Instinct,” one of King’s more well-known sermons that has largely been ignored as a subject matter for academic critical analysis. This paper highlights both the rhetorical techniques of persuasion and the overall message of King’s piece, both in the context of its delivery and today. This analysis will hopefully add to previous scholarly conversations about King’s style and source material. In addition, this paper will explore King’s thoughts in “The Drum Major Instinct” regarding leadership in the modern world and what it means to be successful.

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On February 4, 1968, in what would be his last sermon delivered at his home Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. argued that human aspiration is the root of many of the world’s problems: the “basic desires for recognition, for importance” (“The Drum Major Instinct”). King engages this idea in his sermon, eponymously entitled “The Drum Major Instinct.” King lays the framework of his forty-minute sermon by defining “The Drum Major Instinct” as “a desire to be out front, a desire to lead the parade, a desire to be first” and the need “to be important, to surpass others, to achieve distinction. . .” King believes this drive permeates almost every aspect of individual life and broad social interactions, tying it to issues of racial prejudice, international relations, poverty, leadership, materialism, and success. The diverse array of topics covered in the sermon lends itself to many opportunities for analysis and different interpretations of the text. The purpose of this analysis is to scrutinize the message King delivers, contextualize his arguments, engage the meaning of these arguments, and dissect King’s rhetorical tactics in his appeal to redefine the contemporary conception of success and challenge the established definition of successful modern leadership. King’s message is characterized by a rhetoric of inclusion expressed through different rhetorical devices including antithetical encomium, praeteritio, and anaphora.

By analyzing his message, it becomes clear that King challenges the contemporary articulation of what Robert N. Bellah would define in his essay “Civil Religion in America” as the United States’ “civil religion.” King’s criticism of the contemporary understanding of the “institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation” is the amount of emphasis put on property and the accumulation of material wealth (Bellah 8). King suggests an alternative conception of civic virtue where success is focused on measuring inclusivity, commitment to principle, and servant leadership. The overall religious message of the piece is contrasted with a Darwinian understanding of human nature: every human, regardless how altruistic, is inherently motivated by the desire to achieve greatness and be recognized as important for him-/herself. King provides a useful strategy and nuanced argument that, though this instinctual drive has led many to make morally questionable decisions, “The Drum Major Instinct” is not inherently immoral. Rather than attacking “The Drum Major Instinct” as being an inherently evil instinct in the hearts of human

beings to be fought or a debilitating disease meant to be overcome through Christ, King takes a different approach. He chooses to question what it means to be great, and what is meant by a successful life, and in doing so, how “The Drum Major Instinct” is applied. King believes this instinct can be harnessed to better the world instead of dividing it. King uses his distinct rhetorical style to challenge the popular definition of success by arguing that a successful life is one defined by service, humility, and charity.

Since his funeral in 1968, “The Drum Major Instinct” has long been considered to be an important piece of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s rhetorical legacy. It was included in one of the largest published compilations of King’s essential writings and speeches in 1986 [“The Drum Major Instinct (4 February 1968)” 259]. Usually, during Martin Luther King, Jr. Day events, there are repeated calls from academics and civic leaders in speeches and non-scholarly writings advocating the importance of this speech. The speech is occasionally invoked in the public sphere today to support issues of social justice (Farmer). Even though the sermon remains popular, there is little scholarly work on the rhetoric and message of “The Drum Major Instinct.” It is likely disregarded as a singular unit for academic study because of the religious nature of the message, a seemingly overly optimistic call to duty, and the normal circumstances behind its initial delivery. In addition, the sermon does not focus on an individual topic (e.g., segregation or Vietnam) like his other, more documented speeches. King was assassinated before he was able to effectively combat systemic issues of poverty, and this sermon does not focus on the civil rights issues King is most well-known for, making it less appealing/relevant to many researchers. This sermon gets lost behind the immense amount of rhetoric produced by King in the push for equality. Even so, the sermon has a message that is extremely applicable to the present and should arguably be praised alongside the “I Have a Dream” and “Mountaintop” speeches.

### Context and Significance

The sermon was originally delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia on Sunday, February 4, 1968. It appears this day was no different from any other Sunday service when Martin Luther King, Jr. was in town and able to give the sermon at the church that he co-pastored with his father, Martin Luther King, Sr. What would ultimately change the significance of the message was that the sermon was recorded, so portions could possibly be used for the *Martin Luther, King Jr. Speaks* radio program put on by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Burns 116). The weekly thirty-minute program began to air the previous year, in early 1967, to show the SCLC’s work with social movements through interviews, calls to action, and speeches from prominent activists (Emory University Libraries). The full sermon would not have been broadcast due to the limited length of the program. Had it not been recorded in its entirety, it is quite possible that “The Drum Major Instinct” would have never received a response any larger than from the congregation in attendance that day. The recording allowed King’s words to be replayed one more time in a different context, which would significantly impact its visibility to the greater public.

The notoriety of the speech in later years is a byproduct of King’s early death and the circumstances surrounding the second occasion the sermon was heard echoing through the pews at Ebenezer as a recording. At the request of King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, the original recording of “The Drum Major Instinct” was played on April 9, 1968 at King’s funeral, two months after it was first delivered (Nelson). King’s sister, Christine King, remembered the sermon within hours of his assassination because the message concluded by King delivering a hypothetical eulogy of himself. She immediately recommended that Coretta should find a recorded copy to play at the funeral service. Coretta agreed (Burns 116). The Associated Press reported that an estimated 120 million people watched all or some of King’s funeral service live on television (“120 Million” A6). The

live video feed of the funeral meant that millions would hear at least part of “The Drum Major Instinct,” and it would be reported to even more by the media (Miller, *Voice* 225). Attendees at the service who heard some portion of the sermon included Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, George Romney, Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, Thurgood Marshall, Stokely Carmichael, Jackie Kennedy, and many other leaders across disciplines and movements (Nelson 3). At the time of original delivery, however, King did not know that the hypothetical eulogy at the end of the sermon would ultimately be used as the actual eulogy at his funeral service. King could not have guessed that his words would have the large distribution they ultimately did.

The rhetorical situation when the sermon was initially delivered could be viewed in many different ways. Beyond the seeming normality of the Sunday service conditions surrounding the sermon, there are many different levels of context beyond immediately visible exigencies. Religion is one exigency that contributed to the rhetorical situation, and as such, affected what King said and how he said it. Academics note today that King specialized in using religion, oratory associated with folk preachers, religious hymns, and spirituals as a tool to convey a message of unity and collectivity (Miller, *Voice* 64–65). Unlike most of King’s most notable addresses and writings, this piece was initially delivered for a religious service. His other notable pieces include “The Letter from Birmingham Jail” written from jail, the “I Have a Dream Speech” delivered at an outdoor rally for jobs and freedom in Washington D.C., and his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize at an auditorium at the University of Oslo, Norway. Other notable speeches were delivered in churches, including his “Beyond Vietnam” and “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speeches, but not as a part of the normal Sunday services. The context of a Sunday service likely has an impact on the message delivered, including Christian religious undertones. The audience was mostly Christian and familiar with its doctrine. The African-American church in particular has a long history and tradition of political action and mobilization being incorporated into normal services (Calhoun-Brown 935). A sermon that incorporates political roots may be considered unusual in Protestant-Anglo Saxon churches, but at Ebenezer it would have been considered a normal part of the weekly lesson. African-American clergy have distinct rhetorical traditions that stem from the time of slavery and the need to transmit information during that time. This rhetorical legacy, labeled the “black folk pulpit,” not only includes political elements, but unique phrasing, rhetorical formulas, theological differences, epistemological differences, and stylistic elements, particularly in a Southern-Baptist church such as Ebenezer (Miller, “Epistemology” 225).

The sermon should also be viewed in the context of the struggle for supremacy within the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement was consistently fragmented (Jones and Connelly 21). Civil rights leaders represented different organizations and churches of varying focuses and constituencies; they represented the church, legal defense, student advocacy, social movements, and a wide range of collectives. Many of these advocates publicly strived for the title of “leader of the Civil Rights Movement,” believing their solution to be the most important to the cause. In addition to these factions, leaders such as Stokely Carmichael (though no longer leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1968) and members of the Black Power movement delivered messages of division and derision towards white Americans, which further exacerbated attitudes of division (Carmichael). As these issues continued, “The Drum Major Instinct” was delivered at a time when King was starting to shift his attention from solely issues of racial inequality to deeper issues behind the racial disparity related to income inequality and poverty (Jackson 11). Specifically, at the time of his death, King was in the midst of organizing a second march on Washington as part of the Poor People’s Campaign.

Today, organized religion is on the decline in the United States. Religious affiliation is at its lowest point in U.S. history (Anwar). The deep disparity in wages marks the largest gap of inequality the United States since the 1960s (DeSilver). Our fundamental perception of the United States

government is even under challenge; academics note that the growing power of economic elites in the United States would suggest the U.S. national government is more similar to an oligarchy than a democracy or republic (Gilens and Page 565). “The Drum Major Instinct” offers a guide to those looking to ignite social reform from a variety of perspectives on any number of issues. Those who wish to emulate King’s approach to success in their own pursuit of greatness need look no further than this text. Though more study is needed, this text could offer the solution to successful leadership in modern times to guide a new generation through dramatic social change.

The distinct differences in attitudes and beliefs between the millennial generation<sup>1</sup> and older generations hint at a looming shift in values and a pending challenge to the traditional conception of America’s civil religion. Making this sermon particularly relevant today, the millennial generation has been characterized by their penchant for defining success through achievements, their need for recognition, and an all-encompassing focus on the self. Indeed, the United States will undoubtedly reach a tipping point where the values of the millennial generation overtake the established values of previous generations. When this happens, the country must reflect on what really matters, how we interpret American civil religion, and what lessons we can learn from it. Beyond a prescription to solve political and social ills, King’s sermon provides a message for all humanity in the midst of historical social change. In redefining success, King paves a pathway for the country to follow and a standard to strive for.

### The Text

There are four important texts surrounding “The Drum Major Instinct” sermon. Stanford University has an accessible online audio recording and a complete transcript of the recording. The university’s transcript was copied from the original transcript accessible online at The King Center website; the two contain no discrepancies (The King Center). By the time the audio file was converted to digital format, it lost a few sentences due to warping of the record. Both online transcripts include those original words and sentences, which were skipped, because they were written down before the audio file malfunctioned. This means for the purposes of this criticism, the text analyzed was a complete text. In addition to the original transcript and audio recording, there is also a handwritten outline, which King looked at while delivering the sermon (The King Center). King did not have notes written for a significant portion of the second half of the sermon, suggesting it was delivered either from memory or extemporaneously without a prompt. The final important text is an original transcript of another sermon, delivered by James Wallace Hamilton, entitled “Drum-Major Instincts” on file in Emory University’s special collections.

Most online transcripts of the sermon, including the transcript available on the Stanford University website, reference that King’s lesson was based upon the “1952 homily ‘Drum-Major Instincts’ by J. Wallace Hamilton” (“The Drum Major Instinct”). A transcript of Hamilton’s homily survives at Pitts Theological Library at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia from when it was delivered on March 6, 1949. This date is of note, because it was three years prior to the date generally associated with the Hamilton text on Stanford’s website and other sources online. This means that either the date generally associated with the text is incorrect, or Hamilton delivered the speech multiple times throughout the course of his career as a pastor. The archives of Hamilton’s career sermons at Emory University did not reference “The Drum Major Instinct” in any other sermon title. Regardless of the reason why there is confusion about the date, it should be noted for the public record that there is a transcript of Hamilton’s homily dated much earlier than widely accepted.

Beyond using Hamilton’s original sermon as an inspiration for his own sermon, King uses many anecdotes and phrases word for word from Hamilton’s text. King has been criticized by some academics in the years after his death for deliberate verbatim plagiarism (Thelen 11–13). Indeed, this sermon should count as another example where King cannot claim full ownership of the ora-

tory with which he is generally credited. It could be argued that the practice of preachers swapping generic stories with each other to better illustrate their message is a tradition in Baptist rhetorical style. Because of the almost exact nature of his plagiarism, it is easy to tell which parts of the sermon are by Hamilton and which parts are uniquely King. Most of the first half of King's sermon stems directly from Hamilton's homily (Hamilton 2). This is also the half, which King had written the most down on his outline. Many phrases and parables King directly lifts from Hamilton's sermon. The quote below is a parable about receiving a new magazine used by King in the "The Drum Major Instinct":

I got a letter the other day, and it was a new magazine coming out. And it opened up, "Dear Dr. King: As you know, you are on many mailing lists. And you are categorized as highly intelligent, progressive, a lover of the arts and the sciences, and I know you will want to read what I have to say." Of course I did. After you said all of that and explained me so exactly, of course I wanted to read it. [*laughter*] ("The Drum Major Instinct")

The following is the same parable from Hamilton's original work:

I received a letter from the subscription manager of a newly launched magazine. He started off on what he called a perfectly honest note: "As you undoubtedly know," he said in the first paragraph, "Your name is on several mailing lists in which you are classified as 'highly literate, progressive, interested in world affairs, good literature and science.' Therefore I believe you will be interested in what I have to say." Of course I was interested since he had described me so exactly. (Hamilton)

After his message goes beyond the constraints of Hamilton's original homily, there is a turning point in King's cadence and diction on the audio recording. The delivery of the sermon becomes more similar to King's other work. King's trademark use of anaphora, the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses, sentences, or lines to create emphasis, becomes much more prevalent during this latter half of the speech. During this second part of the sermon, King's tone changes and his articulation becomes more pronounced. The sermon begins to evoke the same building pattern as his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The following textual analysis of the sermon will focus on what was said during the sermon after this turning point. After this point, King uses three main sections to convey meaning in the lesson. King uses anaphora in each of these sections to highlight each overarching contention. The first section sets the foundation of servant leadership by using rhetoric of inclusion. Within this section, King gives three examples to illustrate the possible negative outcomes of the Drum Major Instinct. He cites three cases where inclusion leads to better results than exclusion. His examples include the importance of inclusive church community, highlighting the drum major instinct's role in racial prejudice and challenging the ideal of American exceptionalism. The next major section of the sermon uses anaphora to construct an antithetical encomium of Jesus Christ. The final, most famous part of the sermon is when King delivers his own eulogy. In this section he uses anaphora to put emphasis on what really matters in life and in doing so what the true focus of a leader should be.

### **Section One: Rhetoric of Inclusion and Anaphora**

The first section covered in this analysis starts roughly halfway through the sermon at 18:07 in the audio recording available on Stanford University's website. This section uses rhetoric of inclusion in an attempt to create an alternative interpretation of the drum major instinct to fit with King's definition of a successful leader. King argues that the most prevalent form of the drum major instinct creates sentiments of exclusivism. The modern definition of success elevates accomplish-

ments of the individual over how his or her life impacts and benefits society. King uses the examples of church community, international relations, and racial injustice as proof that the current construction of success (i.e., achieving accolades) in U.S. culture is based around exclusivism. This section grounds the main argument of his sermon; rhetoric of inclusivity derived from the breakdown of social distinction allows for a transcendent acceptance for equality. King equates “the church” in its proper form to righteousness, but warns that even the church is not above being corrupted by a distortion of the drum major instinct. He says:

When the church is true to its nature, (*Who*) it says, “Whosoever will, let him come.” (*Yes*) And it does not supposed to satisfy the perverted uses of “The Drum Major Instinct”. It’s the one place where everybody should be the same, standing before a common master and savior. (*Yes, sir*) And a recognition grows out of this—that all men are brothers because they are children (*Yes*) of a common father. (“The Drum Major Instinct”)

He uses the anaphora “The church is the one place...” to focus the audience’s attention on the importance of inclusivity in the church. This rhetorical device places emphasis on the church staying above social distinctions and focusing on a doctrine of inclusivity. He continues:

And the church is the one place where a doctor ought to forget that he’s a doctor. The church is the one place where a Ph.D. ought to forget that he’s a Ph.D. (*Yes*) The church is the one place that the school teacher ought to forget the degree she has behind her name. The church is the one place where the lawyer ought to forget that he’s a lawyer. And any church that violates the “whosoever will, let him come” doctrine is a dead, cold church, (*Yes*) and nothing but a little social club with a thin veneer of religiosity. (“The Drum Major Instinct”)

Outside the context of the sermon, King’s assessment of the church can be extrapolated to better understand his viewpoint of the Civil Rights Movement. In other public addresses, King references righteousness as part of the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements. King claims that exclusivism cannot be a part of the church. Thus, exclusivity cannot be a part of righteousness and elaborated further; exclusivity cannot be a part of a social movement. Speaking directly to the civil rights context, exclusivity cannot be a part of the civil rights movement or its leaders. This message challenges alienating messages of separation touted by the Black Power movement, activist Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and others who chose to use more divisive rhetoric to promote the Civil Rights Movement.

King then transitions from espousing the importance of an inclusive church community to directly advocating for inclusivity in the fight against racial prejudice. He delivered a humorous parable about an experience he had in prison proselytizing to his white jailors and his wish for them to join in the civil rights cause. The jailors were adamantly opposed to the Civil Rights Movement. The story ends with the well-received one-liner, “And when those brothers told me what they were earning, I said, ‘Now, you know what? You ought to be marching with us.’ [*laughter*]” (King). The joke asserts that even whites in opposition to the Civil Rights Movement are not immune to the effects of income inequality and poverty. The story acts as a euphemism for the absurdity of deep-seated hatred and racial prejudice in a way that does not belittle those who hold those feelings. The assertion that poor whites were equivalent to blacks would have been considered highly controversial by many people in the South at that time. In a non-threatening way, King uses a story and humor to tie together the issues of race, poverty, and the equality of whites and blacks. Many people in the U.S. refused to associate the issues of race and poverty (even today this remains a contentious political issue) but by using humor, the ramifications of King’s argument seems less threatening. The controversial message is more easily swallowed when framed in a parable format. From the audible reaction of the audience, the congregants at Ebenezer Baptist Church do not seem to

question King's contention that racial injustice and economic inequality are related. The use of this humorous antecedent is a flashback to King's earlier, pre-1967 rhetoric (Appel 376). This moment of levity counters the overall mood of the piece and serves a rhetorical purpose by presenting a controversial point in a less offensive way.

King's final example on the importance of inclusivity uses anaphora to focus on international relations and the concept of American exceptionalism. While the first two examples hinted at individual leadership within the church or the Civil Rights Movement, the final example addresses national leadership in a culture shaped by American civil religion. His remarks on international relations criticize the concept of American exceptionalism, a key teaching in the concept of American civil religion, as promoting exclusivism. He describes this arrogance as a symptom of the drum major instinct:

But this is why we are drifting. And we are drifting there because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. "I must be first." "I must be supreme." "Our nation must rule the world." (*Preach it*) And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I'm going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken. God didn't call America to do what she's doing in the world now. (*Preach it, preach it*) God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war as the war in Vietnam. And we are criminals in that war. We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I'm going to continue to say it. And we won't stop it because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation. (King)

Extrapolated, King is arguing that the United States has lost its moral grounding in foreign-policy decision-making. His description of the how the United States is operating in the world likens the country to an imperialist nation seeking to expand its influence, rather than the traditional articulation of value-driven U.S. foreign policy.

## Section Two: An Antithetical-Encomium of Christ

In the second major portion of the sermon, King creates an antithetical-encomium of Jesus Christ to serve as a paradox to the audience's assumption surrounding the importance of Christ. An encomium is a grouping of praises of a person, place, or thing. An encomium is composed of many different parts, including a description of where the subject is from, how they were raised, what they have done, a comparison of them to others, and a conclusion which cajoles the audience to follow the lead of the subject (Burton, "Encomium"). King systematically uses this structure to describe an anonymous figure who would be quickly recognizable to the audience as that of Jesus Christ. King never mentions Jesus Christ by name. Using an encomium of Christ's life while preserving anonymity creates a sense of mutual understanding that this man was so great, that it is not even necessary to say his name. However, the way King describes Christ does not completely fit the definition of a normal encomium. This analysis describes King's rhetorical technique as an antithetical-encomium because of the juxtaposition of opposite meaning of what is said and what is meant. King uses the encomium to praise Christ, but uses a list of "failures" instead of "excellencies" to construct praise ("Encomium"). By definition, an encomium *praises* the "attended excellencies" of the subject, but King uses the exact same structure of an encomium to present an individual who would quickly be described as a failure upon hearing his/her individual traits and accomplishments:

. . . He was born in an obscure village, (*Yes, sir*) the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked s a carpenter until he was thirty years old. (*Amen*) Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some

things...He didn't have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. (*Yes*) He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. They said he was an agitator. (*Glory to God*) He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. (*Amen*) One of his closest friends denied him. Another of his friends turned him over to his enemies. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. (*Lord help him*) When he was dead he was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend. (King)

By describing the events associated with Christ's life, measured by accepted modern-day standards for success, King takes the preconceived notions of the audience and flips them. The one human who would be considered the ultimate pinnacle of greatness to his audience, would in many ways be considered a failure by the traditional standards of the drum major instinct. He takes the traditional structure of an encomium, but describes failures instead of successes. This reversal is why the description of Jesus is labeled an antithetical-encomium. It switches the traditional rhetoric of an encomium but manages to use the audience's deeply engrained beliefs to deliver the same message of praise. The audience's views of Christ do not change, instead they are led to rethink what success means. They must make a choice between continuing their preconceived notions of success and believing in their ultimate foundation of faith in Jesus Christ. The message is powerful, because it uses the audience's ultimate authority to leverage change in their deeply held social beliefs. The audience reconsiders what society has defined for them as the ultimate meaning of achieving success.

### **Section Three: Praeteritio and Anaphora**

The last section of the sermon, during which King delivers a hypothetical eulogy for himself, lasts for the final three minutes and twenty-nine seconds of oratory, starting at 35:07. King uses praeteritio, a technique in rhetoric when the orator mentions information by seemingly dismissing the information, to reference his worldly awards without making them the focus of his ethos (Burton, "Paralipsis"). King begins with the following words: "Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school" (King). Before this excerpt, the preceding structure of the sermon clearly leaves the impression that focusing on recognitions should be viewed as a negative pursuit. While contextually the point of mentioning his Nobel Peace Prize and his "three hundred or four hundred other awards" is to discount them, it cannot be overlooked that these lines create an emotional response in the audience, which solidifies how they will view the subsequent message. In order to affirm himself to the audience though, he must validate his ethos through traditional constraints by bringing up his awards and honors, the very items that King just asserted were not important. By mentioning his accomplishments (even in dismissing them) it builds the audience's trust in him and his ethos, but more importantly, it creates a contrast to the perceived feelings of self-importance by those listening in the audience. It causes the audience to momentarily consider their own pursuit of success and compare it to someone who can say he has reached the pinnacle of greatness as defined in the traditional



sense. While bringing up his awards and level of worldly success may seem contrary to the very message of the sermon, King makes the subsequent message of humbleness and service even more impactful. By using praeteritio to mention the awards, the audience cannot dwell on them for an extended time before King transitions from telling the audience what they shouldn't strive for to recommending the proper pursuit of greatness as a leader. He recommends what leaders should ultimately pursue through the use of anaphora in presenting a eulogy that details what he would most like to hear his life accomplished:

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. (*Yes*)

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody.

I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. (*Amen*)

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. (*Yes*)

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. (*Yes*)

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. (*Lord*)

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. (*Yes*)

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. (*Amen*) Say that I was a drum major for peace. (*Yes*) I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. (King)

By using his life as a second and final example of the difference between successful leadership as defined by contemporary society and his ideal of servant leaders, King creates an easily accessible parallel for the congregation listening that day. While Christ is a religious figure to the congregation, King is a real person they are able to interact with. King uses deeply held notions of the audience to deliver an impactful message on the need for servant leadership. He relies on the congregation's admiration for him as a leader to encourage his audience to question the social paradigms of success. He has become a success in the traditional standard, but that is not the measure of how he ultimately wants to be remembered. His claim is simple: the drum major instinct may never go away, but people can shape their focus on being the best at serving and loving others.

While Christianity has been used to promote many different viewpoints and beliefs, according to King, servant leadership is most in line with the Christian doctrine. This belief holds true in comparison to the thoughts of twentieth-century theologian, C.S. Lewis, in his foundational book *Mere Christianity*. Lewis places pride as the number one sin that a man can commit under the Christian doctrine (121). King's thoughts on leadership, specifically his aversion to pride and his focus on serving others as central cores of leadership, echo Lewis's beliefs. This message should not be restricted to philosophical and theological debate. King's work with the Civil Rights Movement shows he was not only a man who spoke in generalized moralistic platitudes, he was a calculating man. He chose to recruit children to march in Birmingham, Alabama, with the knowledge that that Eugene "Bull" Connor would likely use water hoses and police dogs ("Children's Crusade"). As such, King's message that a leader must overcome his pride to truly serve others in life should not be dismissed as the superficial rhetoric of a religious sermon but rather, accepted as a very real challenge to leaders in the church, the Civil Rights Movement, government, and all who hear his sermon. King presents a challenge to rethink how we approach leadership and define success.

### Response

Ironically, King's final description of self during his hypothetical eulogy in "The Drum Major Instinct" would later be used by others to label King as a leader rather than a servant. Today, King

is framed in the public sphere as a martyr for justice and described in a way that dismisses his humanity. Ironically, he has become a human icon framed by others in ways that overshadow the message he brought. It seems the very message of the sermon, of putting our focus on values rather than individuals, was lost to most soon after the words left King's mouth. The greater message of servant leadership as an alternative practical model of leadership was forgotten. Today, people use this sermon to focus on how great King was, rather than how they can apply his message in their own pursuit of greatness. After King's funeral, articles ran in newspapers across the country with titles such as "After King, the Search is on for a New 'Drum Major'" and "'Say I Was a Drum Major'...Dr. King's Recorded Words" and other headlines with a similar focus on defining King as the "Drum Major" of the Civil Rights Movement (Sitton E2, Associated Press 27). The media mostly ignored the message of this sermon, instead focusing on sound bites which fit into their characterization and their storyline: the rise and demise of a great person, not of the causes he gave his life to serve, or how he achieved that greatness.

When this sermon is referenced today, the words are mostly taken out of context and, in some cases, completely misquoted. Words from this speech were chosen to be included on the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington D.C. When the monument was complete, the inscription read, "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness" when King actually said "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter" (King, "The Drum Major Instinct"). Civil rights activist and poet Maya Angelou took offense to the change, arguing that leaving out the word "if" from the inscription changed the meaning from King's original intent. The quotation was eventually removed after outcry regarding the accuracy of the quote (CNN Staff). Ultimately, more analysis and a further distribution of "The Drum Major Instinct" is needed if there is ever to be a change in how the United States views leadership, success, and greatness in a growing climate focused on the self and accomplishment.

### Conclusion

The day servants in the United States are held as the standard of greatness to strive for; the day that the "servant" part of servant-leadership is held in higher regard than the "leadership" aspect; the day when success is defined by how well a person loved his/her neighbor: that is the day that King's message of inclusivity, humility, and charity will be fulfilled. In "The Drum Major Instinct," King argues that the quest for greatness is not inherently corrupt, and the drum major instinct is only a source of arrogance if we allow our pursuit to be distorted. By maintaining a commitment to values and serving others, we have the ability to harness our desire for greatness into the ultimate meaning of a successful life.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The Millennial Generation is a group of young people whose birth years range from 1980 to 2000. This generation is actually just slightly larger than the Baby Boom generation (born from 1946 to 1964). Nearly 78 million Millennials were born between 1980 and 2000.

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